

T r a n s c r i p t o f t a p e r e c o r d i n g

MR. JAMES E. WEBB'S RETIREMENT ANNOUNCEMENT TO NASA GENERAL MANAGEMENT on the 16th of September 1968 in the Program Review Center at NASA Headquarters.

DR. PAINE: Mr. Webb has just come back from seeing President Johnson at the White House, and I think it is a good idea to let him tell you all about it, and see what really he has been up to today.

MR. WEBB: Well, so many times I have talked to you all from the back, and maybe I ought to stand up in the front where I can look you in the face.

I think that maybe I ought to start out by saying that the criterion that the President and I have used now for some time, on quite a number of ideas, has been how this agency could be the strongest possible at some future date in time.

We have canvassed before -- and again today -- the fact that we still have a very serious problem to get our interim operating plan agreed to in the Congress.

The President's judgment and mine is that we are not likely to get a final decision on our appropriation bill until after the election. So, with a minimum operating plan, to be firmed up sometime after the election, you move immediately into the question of what the 1970 budget recommended by an outgoing President should be.

There is another fairly major problem that has to have very high-level attention. Now, once the President's budget

is submitted, of course, there will be the inauguration of a new President, and then that new President would have to decide what it is he is going to put in to change the President's budget. He is either going to accept the one sent down in January, or he is going to want to make changes.

You all remember that President Kennedy did change Mr. Eisenhower's budget -- raised it from \$950 million to about \$1.8 billion. That just about doubled it, when he came in as President.

So, NASA faces these questions of interim operating plans, submission of a 1970 budget, installation of a new President, changes in the budget by the new President, and operation by the Congress on this changed budget, with the fiscal year beginning in July 1969.

So, we have looked at various things that are involved in this process and have also agreed between the two of us -- and I hope most of you will agree -- that NASA has the strongest team that it has ever had.

We have had now almost eight years of experience in an expanded program, after an initial period of bringing all the different elements together. So we debated whether or not if I were to leave a vacancy on the 20th of January -- which is a logical assumption. I mean I think anyone would say that if Mr. Nixon is President, he will want to appoint a person of the

Republican Party as Administrator. He might want to keep Tom Paine, and the rest of you, at least for a while, but you do have changes. There is no such thing as a static situation when the country changes over and a new Party takes over.

On the other hand, if Mr. Humphrey should take over, you do have the question of how he wants to operate, and it is not likely that he would want to take a man who is, say 62, and start out on a period of four years which he would hope to expand into eight. He would want to look for a leadership, and the time to make that change to create the kind of a situation within his Cabinet and within his administrative agencies that is his team. This is what happens.

I have been now -- believe it or not -- through five transitions, from Mr. Herbert Hoover through Mr. Roosevelt. And I was with the Rules Committee when the House was organized by the Democrats and the Senate by the Republicans -- that famous Hundred Days -- and from Roosevelt to Truman; from Truman to Eisenhower; and from Eisenhower to Kennedy, and Kennedy to Johnson. I mean I still know something about what happens during these periods of transition. And I can tell you that it is not likely -- and the President and I agree on this -- that I would be Administrator after the 20th of January.

So you immediately face the question of what is the best thing to do.

The next thing we discussed is how to keep this as non-political as possible at a time when politics is in the minds

of a lot of people.

And in the end, it was the President himself who said, "I believe we could announce your retirement on your birthday -- the logical time." I have been telling him for 13 months that I was a candidate for nothing except retirement on my birthday.

He has asked me -- as most of you know -- about various other jobs in the government, at a very high level, and has announced publicly without my permission that he was considering me for some of these. He has always said, very nicely, that he would like to have me in his Cabinet if I were not doing something else that he thought was more important.

But in the end, he said this morning that he thought the surest way to avoid any political flavor of an action after the election -- or at the time of the change of Presidency -- would be to do the retirement now, and to count on a very simple fact: that under the direction of Tom Paine and the other key officers of this agency you will have on the 20th of January a record of having done a doggone good job.

No matter how you figure it, a person who has been through all of the ups and downs that I have becomes slightly controversial. There is no reason why this agency, after some four months of operation -- between now and the 20th of January -- should not have an image of success and coherence, so that the new President has to look at it slightly different than he would

if it were a continuation of what has existed under Kennedy and Johnson for eight years.

I am not smart enough to second-guess the President. This was his analysis.

Now, when we got to that point, he said, "Why don't we tell the press today?"

I said, "Well, now, if you think this ought to be announced at the White House, if you think something ought to be said....I haven't had time to call Tom Paine. I haven't called my wife, and she would be pretty mad if she called me and said, 'My friends have called me and they heard this on the radio.' She would say, 'Why didn't you call me?'" (Laughter)

So I guess I will have to face that when I get home. (Laughter)

I find that women take these things a little more personally. (Laughter)

But, in any event, the President did call George Christian and suggested that I go down to his office and call in the press and, instead of the simple thing of saying that it was agreed to that I should retire, we got into a lot of discussion about the space program, and you fellows will read that in your newspaper, I guess, or you could see it on the ticker -- you have got stuff coming off the ticker now.

I made the point that we have had great success, but that we were not going to achieve preeminence in space through our programs as they are funded. But I thought that our country would have to use the capability that we have built up to expand the program considerably at some time in the future.

And then they asked me to go before the television cameras and say the same thing, and I did.

Now, the President expressed the highest confidence in Tom Paine. He said he would like to have him come and see him pretty soon, and to tell the press that he was going to name Tom as the Acting Administrator, which means that he is not going to consider bringing in another person between now and January.

You do have, right here in this room, the leaders that will be expected to perform. Now I have offered to Tom -- and offered to the President -- to remain as a consultant or adviser to the agency.

I said to the President, between now and January 20th -- or after -- I told Tom I would do whatever I could as long as anyone thinks I could be of any help.

I have just talked to Congressman Miller of California and told him the same thing.

So, in a way, I believe that, come January 20th, the image of a group that has operated successfully for four months

through two important launches at least in the Apollo program, I think that any President, looking at that group, has got to sort of look at it as a capable, non-political group, whether he happens to like me personally, or dislike me personally.

I think I could say in the confidence of this room that no Administrator could have a completely easy relationship in everything he has to deal with, with the President or the Vice President.

I have had many areas of agreement with Mr. Johnson. In some I had to take the position that what others were telling him to do -- not just with this agency -- I have had to do the same with Mr. Humphrey. I had to make it very clear that the advice he was getting was not what I thought was the right thing to do in the interest of this agency.

All of that I think gets washed out in the situation that exists. I have no intention of ever taking another full-time job. I will have I think four different annuities coming to me at various times -- 62 to 65 -- that have accumulated over the past, so that while I will not have a lot of money, I will have enough to live on without having to earn any money, so that as far as I am concerned, I am not going to take another full-time job, and I do not intend to move away from Washington.

My home is here, and so I will be here, and I will be available. I told Tom if he could give me a little obscure

room somewhere down the hall -- in the basement or somewhere -- that I could be available for him if he wished to consult me, and particularly to be available to look thoughtfully and carefully at anything Paine or his team associates wanted me to look at. I would be happy to give them just as good service and work, say, just as long hours as I have in the past.

One final point: With respect to the President's attitude, I think it is extremely important, he said, "You know, in some ways I welcome getting this in a completely non-political category, because I have been convinced," he said, "as I have reviewed the last 25 or 30 years, that there is a sort of gestation period -- a creative lag."

He pointed out that things that were first suggested that were clearly important things to do maybe 20 or 30 years ago were just now getting into legislation and into action. And he named me off about a dozen things that had been first suggested -- efforts were made to get them done 20 years ago -- but are now going into action.

He said, "We are finishing ten years of Space. What should be-- What will be happening in the next 20 years? What can you say now that will focus attention so that 20 years from now something like that will be done?"

So he has asked me to get with those of you who would be assigned by Tom Paine and begin to sort of examine with

considerable care what could be done now, bearing in mind that there is a lag, and that what we do now may well come to fruition at some time in the future.

He has indicated that he would consider this in the presentation of his 1970 budget. He has already got six invitations for lectures at important forums and universities after January 20th. One of them is at M.I.T.

So, what he wants to do now is to focus his attention on how to put forward those things that should be done and push them both in the 1970 budget and in the period when he leaves the White House.

Now, I think that is not without some significance to you. And the fact that he wants to do it in a non-political atmosphere I think also is not without some importance and significance.

Well, I don't know what I made of that-- This happened awfully fast. I did, from the car, telephone the Vice President's secretary and ask her to please get the message to him. I placed a call to Senator Anderson and to Congressman Miller. I have gotten Anderson but not Miller -- I mean Miller but not Anderson. And that is about all I have had a chance to do, except to receive one phone call from my wife, who complained very much that she had to hear this from a friend.

Has anybody got a question?

Tom? Shall I proceed on now, with other business or -- ?

DR. PAINE: (Inaudible)

MR. WEBB: Well?

DR. NEWELL: I would like to make four points just very briefly.

First of all, you know that everybody here from the agency wishes for you the very best interest and success and enjoyment in whatever you are going to take up, Mr. Webb.

MR. WEBB: Well, you know that I feel the same towards you, from what I have said. And I tell you now, if a person makes up his mind that this is the thing to do, and it is time to do it, there is not very much you can do about it, even if you felt differently. (Laughter)

He was convinced this was the right thing to do, so he just called George Christian and said, "Get the press." (Laughter)

DR. NEWELL: The second point was --

MR. WEBB: I appreciate that. I appreciate it very much.

DR. NEWELL: Tom told me that you had this meeting with the President. I assured him of my own personal strong support in the years ahead.

The third point is that the competence that this team

will bring to supporting Tom and the administration that he will lead comes from the experience in what we have all learned not only here in your administration but under your tutelage. I, for one, feel that I have learned a tremendous amount, watching you get things into motion, seeing how you can make things possible where, without proper thought and operations, they might not be possible.

And then, the final point --

MR. WEBB: I appreciate that, also, very much.

DR. NEWELL: The final point is-- I had a final point. (Laughter)

MR. WEBB: Well, let me just go into that while you are thinking. That I take as a compliment and a statement of the relationship we have. But I want to point out quickly that that is not personal. I mean the way I do things is related to the fact that I had a chance to be Director of the Budget; I had a chance as Under Secretary of State; I had a chance to get into the business world and take off my gloves and compete with some of the tough babies in that field and proved that I could stay the course, and that the business I was in could make money just like the rest of them.

So, in a sense, what I have brought here is not something that I had a particular personal quality in, other than

somehow life had given me this experience, and given me this capability, and in a way I think that is the important thing about NASA -- doing these programs, and giving us the capability to help the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and a lot of other people.

DR. NEWELL: That reminds me of my final point.

MR. WEBB: Okay.

DR. NEWELL: Under your administration I have seen the space program become more than just a technical effort and have impact upon a variety of areas, and personally it is my hope that we will have the opportunity of continuing to work with you, not only as a consultant to NASA, but in expanding the impact of activities --

MR. WEBB: I would be more than happy to do anything that was within my power to forward these things, because I think they are the important things, really, for the future of the country.

We have to be competent technically, but we have to use that technical competence in conjunction with all the forces that play in this milieu or plasma that is life in this country. I guess it is a plasma, isn't it? It is a mixed up, complex kind of a situation that we have.

VOICE: It is a plasma that is highly excited. (Laughter

(Simultaneous discussion inaudible.)

MR. WEBB: There is politics and the race issue, and what has happened in Czechoslovakia, and a clear indication from the Russians that they are going to put their arms around what they want and thumb their nose at the rest of the world, if that is necessary, and build up a technical competence that they can challenge the world with.

They are going to build behind the Iron Curtain a tremendous competence. Don't make any mistake about it. This thing-- What they have done now is really big. A booster put it up there -- probably twice the capability of the Saturn I. These fellows are moving in, and they are clearly going to, now, going to operate behind enough of a wall of iron so that others cannot interfere too much with them. And the leadership can have its way with respect to getting that technological capability.

So you take all the factors that relate to life today and it is a highly excited environment.

Is that enough now? Can I go back and see the Lockheed people? I guess they are coming in at three o'clock.

George, we have missed our appointment. Maybe we don't need it now. (Laughter)

But I will be around as Administrator until the 7th of October, when I will be 62.

I have put in 25 years out of the last 40 on government -- out of the last 40 years I put in 37 as a Marine Reserve Officer -- either on active duty flying airplanes or something else for the Marine Corps. The rest of it I --- Another thing you have to think about, in spite of the fact that you think, you know, that old age can't happen to you, or that you can keep going as strong as you think you did in the fifties, you have got to bear in mind that I am within five years of the age that both Albert Thomas and Hugh Dryden were when they died.

I am not expecting to kick the bucket, or anything like that, but at the same time it is not a bad thing to have a few years to sort of work along at a slightly different pace than I have worked for the 25 that I have worked for the government.

All right, gentlemen. Thank you very much.

(Applause)